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Oil spills, other Hurricane Sandy damage present N.J. with potential pollution headaches



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U.S. Coast Guard Bosun Mate 1st Class Kenny Tucker climbs down along an oil boom to several boats washed up into the Harbortown section of Perth Amboy from marinas on the other side of the Arthur Kill in Staten Island. Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

WOODBRI**GE** — As Hurricane Sandy made its main assault on the coast, a massive tidal surge charged north under bridges and up the Arthur Kill, bisecting New Jersey and Staten Island before raging inland up rivers and creeks.

It was an unstoppable wall of water that kept coming, overtaking homes and businesses, destroying property and threatening lives.

The surge also had another role: It overwhelmed the heavy industrial facilities that stretch for miles along the Arthur Kill. And that water, as well as flooding elsewhere, battered boats of all sizes, inundated massive oil tanks in apartment buildings and schools and deposited an immeasurable number of environmental hazards in places they don't belong.

It's become a potential pollution nightmare for New Jersey and beyond.

In three instances, the surge swept up fuel or oil and pushed it out of containment areas and into the murky water. Two of the spills were small, officials said — equivalent to about one tanker truck each.

But at the Sewaren terminal of Motiva Enterprises, a subsidiary of Shell, the tidal surge damaged bulk fuel tanks, releasing approximately 378,000 gallons of low-sulfur diesel, officials said. Nearly three quarters of that amount escaped the containment area, rushing into the Arthur Kill and its tributaries. That's like 30 tanker trucks pouring their contents into the water.

It represents the largest fuel or oil spill in New Jersey in perhaps a decade or more, officials said.

"That's a major spill," said Larry Ragonese, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection. "On a normal basis, we would have had quite a bit of uproar and media attention."

That, of course, did not happen as the region reeled amid death, destruction and darkness. Quickly and quietly, though, Shell and the other two oil companies that experienced leaks — at the Phillips 66 refinery in Linden and at the Kinder Morgan terminal in Carteret — moved in to plug breached tanks and contain what had already been released.

Within 24 hours, hundreds of workers had responded with oil skimmers, vacuum trucks, water barges, work boats and thousands of feet of containment boom, according to local, state and federal officials who have provided oversight for the work.



Mike Taylor of Northstar Environmental Services in Cape May carries a pump hose as he finishes conducting oil and petroleum remediation from boats washed up into the Harbortown section of Perth Amboy from marinas on the other side of the Arthur Kill in Staten Island in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

By the end of last week, much of the sheen that had previously appeared in aerial photographs of the Arthur Kill and tributaries near the Motiva terminal had disappeared, the officials said. Most of the diesel had either been removed from the water, evaporated or dissipated. Much of the smell in the air was gone.

In Woodbridge, where some residents are concerned the fuel may have been in floodwaters that reached their houses, Mayor John McCormac has no issues with the response.

"The company has been working with DEP since the day of the spill," he said. "It appears to be under control and we're satisfied with their actions."

Both the U.S. Coast Guard, responsible for overseeing the work, and the DEP also said Motiva moved quickly.

The incident was in no way good for the environment, they said, and the spill killed at least seven birds and covered seven others in fuel. But serious damage seems to have been averted, the officials said.

Environmentalists were a bit more cautious in their assessment. The NY/NJ Baykeeper surveyed the impact in Woodbridge last week, photographing an apparent sheen in the township's Sewaren section.

"It's a real mess," Executive Director Debbie Mans said. "Recovery seems to be slow going.

And I don't think most folks realize that there's a lot of sensitive areas along the Arthur Kill."

Elsewhere, the clean-up task was certain to take time. The Coast Guard and the federal Environmental Protection Agency are working to identify and mitigate potential sources of pollution from the Jersey Shore to the Hudson River. It's not a simple job, with any number of things — damaged boats, flooded boiler rooms or loose chemical container — representing possible sources of contaminants.

"We have so many points of pollution," said Coast Guard Cmdr. Eric Doucette, the federal on-scene coordinator for pollution response. "Perhaps thousands."

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